Housing and Infrastructure for Indigenous Australians

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If Australia had carried out a quinquennial census in 1776 or a survey of Australian housing in 1777 it is almost certain that all of the dwellings would have been classified as 'improvised' (Ross, 1987, especially Chapter 3), and any inventory of physical infrastructure would have shown it to be absent. By 1994, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS), the most careful inventory of Indigenous households[1] ever conducted, recorded only 2 per cent of their dwellings as improvised, though some of the 6 per cent 'other' and 'not stated' dwellings may have been of the same kind. But not many, because 95 per cent of dwellings had a bathroom or shower, 96 per cent running water, 96 per cent electricity or gas, 96 per cent at least one toilet and 82 per cent were on a sealed road (ABS, 1996). On the face of it this is a remarkable improvement in the housing of Indigenous Australians, but it has brought problems as well as benefits. Even after a more detailed investigation, it represents a remarkable transformation. Some of the change has occurred as a result of Indigenous people moving into conventional housing in towns and cities. This paper concentrates on the period since the 1960s and on the northern parts of Australia where many people lived traditional lifestyles until recent decades. Especially in the past twenty years there has been a transformation in the living conditions of Indigenous people in the north, including those in rural and remote areas. None of which is to deny that severe problems remain with Indigenous housing.

There is another side to the picture. First, European style housing is far from ideal in meeting the cultural and social needs of Indigenous people for whom traditional values are important[2]. Among the most important defects are its inflexibility and immobility, the inability of the occupants to control their environment and the way European housing isolates its occupants from information about the activities of other members of the community within which they live. Because of the differences in housing desires between Indigenous households, efforts through programs such as the Desert Housing Project (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Housing

[1] Indigenous households are those with at least one indigenous member. The term Indigenous is used to include Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, but in this paper the term Aboriginal is not to be read as excluding Torres Strait Islanders.

[2] Reser (1979), Tonkinson and Tonkinson (1979) and Ross (1987) describe in some detail the shortcomings of European style housing for Aboriginals with tradition belief systems and life styles.

Panel, 1977) to design more suitable dwellings for Indigenous people have not been as successful as had been hoped Nothing can substitute for painstaking consultation with each community (Morel and Ross, 1993). Some of these problems are compounded when individual Indigenous households are located within non-indigenous neighbourhoods so that they lose social contact with other members of their kinship groups (Langford, 1988). Reser (1979), in particular, argues that the stress of having to adapt to different conditions is a major reason for health problems and inappropriate behaviour among Indigenous people.

Second, the quantity of much of their housing is inadequate, at least by European standards. Indigenous housing is much more overcrowded than the housing of other Australians. Using the 1991 Census results and the Canadian National Occupancy Standards, Roger Jones (1994) found that while Indigenous elementary families comprised only 1.4 per cent and other adults 4 per cent of the Australian total, people living in Indigenous households accounted for 10.4 per cent of the additional rooms needed to eliminate homelessness and overcrowding in Australia. As Ross (1987, Chapter 5) has shown, however, European criteria of overcrowding have only limited application to many Indigenous people. Many prefer living, or at least sleeping, near to their close kin even though they also want privacy, especially from people outside their kinship group. And they live around a dwelling rather than inside it most of the time. A counter-intuitive finding of the NATSIS 1994 survey was that '[r]esidents of more crowded households were significantly *less* likely to report fair or poor health than were those living in the less crowded accommodation' (ABS, 1997b, emphasis added).

Third, the quality of much of the housing is unacceptable by European standards. When we think of Indigenous housing most of us think of their housing in rural, often remote, areas, and perhaps housing in town camps in northern and outback Australia. As I shall show later, there are significant differences between Indigenous housing conditions in the capital cities, other urban areas and in rural and remote areas. One recent appraisal by Healthabitat of housing conditions in a remote Cape York Indigenous community (Pormpuraaw) (Pholeros and Groom, 1997) used criteria for adequacy of housing developed in earlier work in South Australia (UPK Report, 1987; Healthabitat, 1992). Nor were the failings minor. Even after the expenditure of $275,000 ($4246 per house) none of the houses met all of the standards. The survey found that in 1996, of the 65 houses surveyed (98 for gas safety) in Pormpuraaw, the following numbers satisfied the standard, with the numbers in brackets showing the number satisfying the standard after the remedial work: 0 (78) for gas safety, 14 (24) for ability to store, prepare and cook food, 19 (35) for ability to use a tub, 19 (57) for ability to wash clothes, 21 (45) for ability to remove waste water safely from the house, 26 (58) for electrical safety, 34 (56) for ability to shower and 35 (54) for access to a working toilet. The standards used might be criticised as being too high, but European households would expect all to be satisfied. A

number of the serious faults were not with the housing itself but with the infrastructure which provided energy, water and sewerage.

Two major reasons have been advanced for these shortcomings. The first is that the housing, the infrastructure to which it is connected (especially waste disposal), and the equipment within the house has not been properly constructed and certainly not to withstand the demanding use to which it is put. Especially taking into account the high cost of repairs in remote areas, much of the equipment is not sufficiently robust and durable. The second is that Indigenous people 'misuse' the housing and its equipment. In the sense that they often overuse by subjecting them to much heavier use than their design load, this is almost certainly true. For reasons spelled out later, temporary, and sometimes permanent, overcrowding are very common.

Recent studies have shown also that rates of hospitalisation are much higher for Indigenous than for other Australians (ABS, 1997a), and some of the causes, for example respiratory diseases and some forms of injury, are directly related to housing conditions. Heppell and Wigley (1981) describe how difficult it is to keep clean when living in a humpy with a dirt floor, and Pholeros et al (1993) describe in some detail the frequency with which services in Aboriginal housing in the north west of South Australia break down and make bathrooms, clothes washing machines and flushing toilets unusable.

Fourth, the rents of even subsidised housing are frequently higher than Indigenous households can afford. Jones (1994) found that at the time of the 1991 Census 7 per cent of the Indigenous households were below the after-housing poverty line even before they met their housing costs, compared with 2 per cent of the non-indigenous households. This means that they could not afford to pay anything for housing. After they had covered their housing costs, 27 per cent of Indigenous households were in poverty, compared with 12 per cent of the non-Indigenous households. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that some non-indigenous households prefer traditional housing which is almost costless, and others fall into serious arrears in paying their rent (KPMG, 1994), and that Indigenous housing organisations have difficulty in paying for maintenance of their stocks of dwellings at an adequate standard. The problem is exacerbated because prospective rent levels are seldom discussed in consultations with communities about proposals to provide them with European-style housing (Ross, 1987).

Especially after the Commonwealth was given power to share policy and administration of Aboriginal affairs through the 1967 Constitutional Referendum, authorities at both state and Commonwealth level that were responsible for improving the lot of Indigenous Australians were faced with many problems. Among the most serious were their much worse health status and lower life expectancy, lower participation in education, lower rates of employment and concentration in low-paid jobs, and lower income than other Australians. Of these, perhaps the most obvious to the casual observer and, at least superficially easiest to deal with, was housing (Reser,

1979). Governments in Australia had been building housing for low income people for many years and believed they knew how to build and manage such housing. Moreover better housing could contribute to better health and better education (it is almost impossible to study in a one-room unfurnished dwelling without electricity), and it could be used to encourage and assist with integration of Aboriginals into the white community and economy. For many years housing accounted for about a quarter of the Commonwealth's total expenditure on Aboriginal advancement (Sanders 1993). By the late 1980s Gray (1989) estimated that 25 000 houses had been built at a cost of about $68 000 per house or an average of $30 000 for every Indigenous family in Australia. But still the problems persisted.

To understand the nature and the origins of the problem it is important to recognise that values, objectives and preferences vary greatly among Indigenous people. In particular they vary from those that have been largely integrated into the dominant society and those who continue to hold strongly to Indigenous values and customs. Those living in urban areas are more likely to be integrated than those in rural locations. But it is important also not to exaggerate these differences and to recognise that even those living in remote locations have been greatly affected by the need to function within a market economy, and the most integrated retain some of their beliefs about land and kinship obligations for example. Large differences occur even among those living in similar locations. Ross (1987), for example, found significant differences between those living in town camps, Aboriginal Reserves, and State housing in Halls Creek in north eastern WA. She found that views about housing and the environment varied greatly with the extent to which people continued to hold traditional Aboriginal values rather than those of the dominant society. It would be expected that Indigenous values would be strongest among those living in predominantly Indigenous settlements, but they are strong also among many living in and near mainly European urban areas.

The 1994 NATSIS, as well as presenting results by states and by ATSIC regions, also present them for capital cities, other urban, and rural areas. Capital cities housed 33 per cent of Indigenous households and 27 per cent of Indigenous people, other urban areas 43 per cent of each, and rural areas 24 per cent of households and 30 per cent of people. The reasons for the differences between the pairs of percentages are first that households in rural areas are larger and second that in capital cities Indigenous households, defined as those with at least one Indigenous member, include more non-Indigenous members: 55 per cent of capital city households include at least one non-Indigenous member compared with only 27 per cent in rural areas.

There are other differences also. The NATSIS (ABS 1994) showed that 34 per cent of households in the capital cities own or are purchasing their dwellings compared with 20 per cent in rural areas, and of those who rent, the great majority in the urban areas rent from private landlords or state housing authorities but in rural areas 57 per cent rent from community housing associations. More dwellings in rural areas are lacking in at least

one of: a toilet, bathroom/shower, or electricity/gas. Only 71 per cent of households in rural areas are satisfied with their dwellings compared with 81 per cent in urban areas.

The survey also collected information on the extent to which adults adhere to cultural beliefs and practices. Invariably a higher proportion of those living in rural areas than in other urban areas did so and the proportions were lowest in the capital cities. But the proportions in capital cities remain relatively high on most measures. The following are capital city percentages with rural percentages in brackets.

Has a place for cultural activities	24	(52)
Identifies with a clan tribal or language group	51	(74)
Believes role of elders is important	82	(88)
Recognises homeland area	69	(85)
Attended cultural activities in previous 12 months	63	(74)
An Indigenous language is main language	3	(33)

Low Incomes

Before looking at more complex reasons why Indigenous people live in poor housing, it needs to be understood that a fundamental reason is that they are poor. The 1991 Census showed that, excluding those who did not state their income, 64 per cent of Indigenous persons aged 15 or over had incomes of less than $12 000 compared with 45 per cent of non-Indigenous, and only 8 per cent of those Indigenous persons had incomes over $25 000 compared with 25 per cent of non-Indigenous (ABS 1997). Policies that begin by trying to improve their housing conditions, while a legitimate response to poor living conditions, treat a symptom rather than the underlying problem of poverty.[3]

Even with rent rebates that are related to income, the large numbers of Indigenous households that rely on pensions, unemployment benefits or other social security payments cannot afford to pay much rent, and some cannot afford to pay anything. As the Industry Commission (1994, 331) pointed out, in remote areas food and clothing are frequently so costly that there is little left over to pay rent. Rental assistance is available on a means tested basis to all tenants receiving a Commonwealth benefit. In 1997 no payment was payable unless the rent paid exceeded a threshold which varied from $36 a week for a single person to $70 for a couple with children, levels which are quite high for people in remote communities and above those charged for much community housing occupied by Indigenous people. A survey carried out in 1994 reflected the extent to which Indigenous people were not eligible

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[3] Other policies of the Commonwealth implemented following the 1967 Referendum were to obtain access to welfare payments for all Indigenous people, which increased their incomes in the short term, and to improve the education of Indigenous people, which was aimed at improving their incomes in the longer term.

for rent assistance because of their low rents. It found that only 39 per cent of those receiving pensions and allowances received rent assistance. Also, 56 per cent of the respondents who were not receiving rental assistance were not aware of its availability (KPMG, 1994).

Relative to non-Indigenous, Indigenous household incomes were higher than their individual incomes because of the larger average size of households. The 1994 Survey found that, excluding those for whom insufficient information was provided, 24 per cent of households had incomes of $16,000 or less, 49 per cent between $16,001 and $40,000 and 27 per cent over $40,000. It found also that 55 per cent of individuals aged 15 and over reported government payments as their main source of income and another 9 per cent reported earned income from the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme, a kind of work for the dole. According to Ross (1987), although it is common for the household income of large Indigenous households to make them ineligible for rental assistance, many household members do not see it as their responsibility to contribute to rental costs.

A Nomadic People

A chapter by Myrna and Robert Tonkinson (1979) in a book on Aboriginal camps and housing was entitled 'Modern housing for sedentarised nomads'. The title highlights one of the problems in providing housing for Indigenous people. One major reason for them living in mostly temporary housing prior to the European invasion was that they moved frequently. Since they were hunters and gatherers they moved between seasons to where food was available and, especially in the drier parts of Australia, they moved when food near where they were living ran out. They moved also for cultural reasons, for example to attend large meetings of clans or groups of extended families for religious and ceremonial purposes. Also individuals have traditional land ownership rights and the responsibility to 'look after' land that may be at some distance from where they usually live, and they need to spend time on their land.

Circular migration which involves regular, perhaps seasonal moves between locations may mean that an Indigenous family's 'usual place of residence', to use a census phrase, is a large region rather than a point location (J. Taylor, 1993). And individuals move between groups to visit, to share responsibility for raising children or to take advantage of visiting rights among their kin. Within a camp a family group may move their dwelling, because of changing social relationships, a conflict with a near neighbour or wanting to be close to another family (Tonkinson and Tonkinson, 1979; Ross, 1987, Chapter 3). Some of these moves are still made by modern Indigenous people and there are new reasons for moving: to get seasonal work or access to education, health and other services. Sometimes they move because they are forced to: because local councils move them on, because children are being given a hard time or even being ejected from schools, because there are no jobs available or because they are

being discriminated against where they live or where they work. One of the challenges in providing better housing is how to cater for the needs of people whose location and spatial needs are likely to vary over time when housing of an acceptable quality is both durable and immobile. For nomadic people living in relatively small groups, impermanent, easily constructed housing was ideal and they did not need to worry about pollution of the locality because they could and did move on after a while.

When their lands were taken over by Europeans for agricultural and grazing purposes, wheat, cotton and sugar replaced native vegetation, sheep and cattle displaced the native fauna, ate the plants Aboriginals used for food, and used and fouled their sources of drinking water. They were unable to continue their nomadic hunting and gathering lifestyles and at first survived by killing the introduced sheep and cattle that had displaced their native fauna food supplies, but that caused conflict with the invaders. Eventually governments forced indigenous people either to rely on employment in the European economy, mainly as stockmen, which required them to live permanently on a cattle station. Alternatively they could live on social security, unemployment benefits and other handouts which they spent in stores dispensing European food, and to get these they had to move to stay in the same place.

Those who worked on cattle stations were frequently able to stay close to their land and fulfil their obligations on it. Others moved, or were moved, to church missions or government funded and controlled reserves and settlements. They were not free to live where they wanted to. It was convenient for missions and governments if they lived in relatively large, stable settlements. Such settlements included people from very different kinship groups and required services that had not been needed in small temporary settlements. One of these was facilities for waste disposal. With the decline of the cattle industry, mechanisation of some of the functions previously performed by stockmen, disputes between Aboriginal workers and station managers about pay and conditions, and the decision in 1966, implemented from 1968, that Aboriginal workers must be paid award wages, Indigenous employment in the cattle industry fell dramatically in the 1960s and early 1970s. Many of the station communities had to move into town camps and/or become incorporated, sometimes occupying areas excised from the cattle stations on which they previously worked. Some cattle stations have been purchased for Aboriginal groups and operated with more or less commercial success. Some individual families have moved into urban areas and occupied (usually rented) ordinary European-style housing.

Mobility remains, however, a characteristic of Indigenous people: mobility between households, to the extent that the concept of the household itself is of limited validity, and mobility between places depending on their education, employment, health, religious and kinship requirements at different times of the year or different parts of the family life cycle. One particular reason for moving is a death in a dwelling, which often results in it being vacated for many months.

J. Taylor (1996) shows that many of the short term moves that were evident from the 1991 Census results were from rural areas to urban areas. In total nearly 7 per cent of the Indigenous people were away from their usual place of residence at the time of the Census, compared with nearly 5 per cent of all Australians. Other studies (Pholeros et al, 1993; Ross, 1987), show the quite dramatic effects of short term movements on the number of people living in particular dwellings at different times which may be only by months apart. Short term movements also cause significant changes in the total population of communities.

It is difficult to provide housing and infrastructure of the kind that Europeans regard as being of a reasonable standard at an acceptable cost if the housing is to be occupied only intermittently or if it has greatly varying numbers of occupants at different times. This is a particularly acute problem in the case of outstations in homelands which may be occupied by only a few families so that only limited infrastructure can be justified, and certainly no school. Families who want to be close to schools or to other kin for a significant part of the year must live away from their outstation. It is a problem also in that the use of a house by a large number of people (30 is not uncommon) for even a short period may exceed its capacity to provide services and lead to breakdown: blockage of sewers and drains, and in laundry and bathroom facilities.

For residents of Jigalong on the edge of the Gibson Desert, over 1000 km north east of Perth and over 100 km east of Newman, the closest town, where nearly all of the housing was traditional in the mid-1970s, the Tonkinsons (1979) emphasised the need for flexibility in any modern housing that might be provided for the Aboriginal residents. Their traditional dwellings could be easily moved and were moved frequently and were very flexible. Residents spent most of their time outside the dwelling. Closeness to or distance from particular other families was important and varied from time to time, and it was important for people to be able to observe others in the camp. Heppell (1979) in the same volume describes attempts that had been made to assist Aboriginals to adapt to European style housing by the provision of transitional housing which had few if any facilities. Most of it was quite unsuitable and was quickly vacated (Heppell and Wigley, 1981).

In a quite different setting to the Gibson Desert, another chapter in the Heppell volume recounts the housing changes in two Cape York communities that were previously mission stations. The Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs replaced the cheap housing made of local materials which had a life of only a few years with European style transportable but durable housing (Taylor John C., 1979). The author describes the cultural adaptations that the residents had to make and the stresses that resulted. But he reports also that nearly all of the residents wanted to occupy one of the transportables.

Since the 1960s there have been continuing efforts to make the new housing constructed in Indigenous communities more suited to their

requirements (Morel and Ross, 1993). But the shift from 'improvised' to structured housing has still required a large effort of adaptation by the Indigenous people who have accommodated with more or less success to living in European-style housing. This is not necessarily a criticism of housing policy because most Indigenous people want housing of European standards rather than something they see as second rate, and most of them have been prepared to live in settled communities rather than their homelands to get it and the services that go with it. They want European-style housing but it does not fully meet the requirements of their preferred lifestyle and they do not use it in the same way as Europeans. There were supply reasons also for most of the housing being of European design. That was the kind of housing Australians knew how to build and, if any significant dent was to be made on the backlog of need with the limited funds available, fairly conventional housing with minor variations to meet local needs was the only realistic option.

Reciprocity, Demand Sharing and the Market Economy

Most non-Indigenous Australians own or rent their housing as nuclear families and a few as groups of unrelated individuals. It is the responsibility of individuals or families concerned to provide and look after their own housing. Even when governments provide housing to individual families, they expect them to contribute to its cost and to maintain it. There are two reasons why this approach to housing has not worked well for Indigenous people. The first and more fundamental is that there are strong pressures for individuals to share their possessions with their kin, and the closer the kinship relation the stronger the pressure. Kinship derives not just from blood relationships and marriage but also from fostering or adoption and from common ties to land (Ross, 1987). Owners may not like sharing their possessions and frequently go to some lengths to avoid it; hence the use by Martin (1993) of the term 'demand sharing' to reflect the 'aggressive egalitarianism' involved. This pressure applies with some force to housing space and its facilities and to belongings stored in houses. The social capital or prestige of Indigenous people within their community derives not from having many or valuable possessions but from being able to accede and acceding to demands for sharing of money and goods (Martin, 1995). The second is that the large efforts that governments in different ways have made to supply housing and infrastructure with relatively little consultation with Indigenous communities about their priorities or needs have resulted in them believing that others are responsible for providing and maintaining their housing rather than themselves.

Karl Polanyi (1945: 165) argued that in order to introduce labour markets into traditional societies, it was necessary 'to annihilate all organic forms of existence and to replace them by a different type of organisation, an atomistic and individualistic one.' He goes on to explain that 'as a rule, the individual in a primitive society is not threatened by starvation unless the community as a whole is in like predicament. Under the *kraal* land system of

the Kaffirs, for instance, ([quoting] Mair ,1934) 'destitution is impossible: whosoever needs assistance receives it unquestioningly." Whether it occurred by design as Polanyi implies or as an inevitable consequence of the introduction of markets, it became more difficult to maintain traditional group responsibilities among Indigenous Australians because of destruction of natural habitats and the incorporation of cash into the Indigenous society. As David Martin (1995: 9) put it in relation to his study community, '... the mission had sought to abstract the Aboriginal person from the matrix of links such as those of kinship and family, which were inherently *collective* in nature, and reformulate him or her as an *individual* in accordance with the beliefs and practices of the dominant society' (emphasis in the original).

Martin goes on to argue that in his community, and among Indigenous Australians generally, the introduction of money had not resulted in the destruction or replacement of cultural distinctiveness. Rather this new resource provided new ways in which social capital could be accumulated through what he calls 'demand sharing', defined as sharing which results from culturally sanctioned demands of others rather than from the generosity of the persons with money or other possessions. Sharing is demanded as part of the aggressive pursuit of equality. Money, and its distribution to individuals through social security, has changed the relative position of individuals as they deal with the tension between individual autonomy and relatedness. But individual incomes have not resulted in individuals and families taking responsibility for their own housing costs, or at least it has been a very slow process.

Receiving income in the form of government payments or income in kind in the form of housing that is unrelated to work, breaks down relationships between effort and reward which exist in most societies, whether the incomes are used to accumulate personal wealth or social capital. For Martin, like many anthropologists, one of the great problems of Aboriginal policy is how to pursue education, employment and development policies that will permit autonomy to Indigenous communities without forcibly assimilating them into the dominant society and causing the destruction of their distinctive culture.

In the context of housing and infrastructure, how can the occupation of a house that is kept clean and well maintained and for which rent is paid regularly become something which is valued in a society in which social rather than individual capital is the criterion of success. Social capital reflects one's relationships with others: requires one to accede to demands for sharing. In another dimension, the high value of social relative to physical or personal capital means that housing does not come high on the list of priorities of traditionally oriented Indigenous Australians.

The Implementation of Government Policy

Difficulties arise from the way governments have set about dealing with the problems of Indigenous housing as well as from differences in the cultural backgrounds and priorities of the Indigenous and dominant societies. When

it became clear that the Indigenous population was not going to die out it was decided that they should be separated from the non-Aboriginal population by moving them into reserves. Later attempts were made to get them out of reserves and integrated into the dominant society by providing them with housing scattered throughout non-Indigenous urban areas. Neither of these policies was completely successful and both occurred earlier in southern than in northern Australia. Sanders (1993) explains that the provision of housing, primarily on the reserves, was used as one of the main instruments of integration; if they could learn to live in European housing they could live in the general community.

State and Territory governments in Australia are responsible for housing of those of any race who cannot afford to buy or rent housing of a satisfactory standard through the market. Although most of those governments have made major efforts in providing housing for their Indigenous people, they have not always been successful in meeting their preferences and cultural needs. Since the 1967 Referendum the funds that the states were using to provide housing for Indigenous people have been supplemented by the Commonwealth through earmarked grants under the Aboriginal Rental Housing Program (ARHP).

Most of the housing provided by these authorities has been conventional suburban European housing and most of it has been in urban areas: the NATSIS found that in 1994 only 7 per cent of the housing of Indigenous households in rural areas was rented from state housing authorities compared with 36 per cent in urban areas. This occurred for several reasons. State housing authorities build very little housing in rural areas for any clients. They need to be confident that if one client vacates one of their houses they are likely to be able to house other clients in it, and this requirement is difficult to meet in rural and remote communities because of the uncertainties about future demand. The alternative is to sell any house that becomes surplus to requirements.

Many Indigenous people in rural areas live on Aboriginal land which cannot be alienated, though they see themselves as owning the houses. Others squat on unleased crown land and face the threat of eviction. Despite the legal difficulties some state housing authorities build housing for Aboriginals on Aboriginal land using funds provided under the ARHP. It has been possible in some cases to obtain leases over suitable areas of crown land for Indigenous housing (Heppell and Wigley, 1981).

In response to the charge that the funds for the Aboriginal Rental Housing Program were not being used by state and territory housing authorities to provide appropriate housing nor to provide housing in rural and remote areas, the Commonwealth in the late 1960s began making funds available to Aboriginal housing organisations for community housing. These organisations did not have difficulty building on Aboriginal land. This was to be provided essentially on the same terms as public housing and states could use ARHP funds to boost the resources of housing associations. By the time of the NATSIS in 1994 nearly half as many Indigenous households were

renting from community organisations (12,500) as were renting State housing (25,400)[4]. As pointed out above, 58 per cent of the community housing is in rural areas compared with only 6 per cent of the State housing.

In 1981, Heppell and Wigley, quoting Braddock (1979), stated that the NT Housing Commission in Alice Springs

> caters for a 'fairly distinct group' of Aborigines, 65 per cent of their tenants being employed and a majority of the others receiving social security or unemployment benefits. In this respect, the Commission plays a major part in providing for the significant number of non-tribal Aboriginal people who are more or less culturally integrated into the wider community (p. 70).

Housing associations were expected to provide housing for those the Commissions could not or would not house. In 1994 it was reported (KPMG, 1995) that there were over 640 Community Housing Associations catering for Indigenous people. The number is uncertain because some were inactive. On average they are quite small with less that 20 dwellings each. Housing is the sole activity of some, but others are multi-purpose organisations which provide housing as well as other forms of social and economic support. Some are broad community development organisations. In 1993-94 ATSIC commissioned KPMG to carry out an analysis of the financial viability of these organisations, and it in turn commissioned Roy Morgan Research Centre to carry out a sample survey of the organisations and a separate survey of their tenants. The results (KPMG, 1994, 1995) help to fill in some of the background to the NATSIS results. A paper by Tim Rowse (1988) on housing for Aboriginals in the Alice Springs area provides further information.

Sanders (1996) points out that rents charged by the housing associations in 1994 were significantly lower than those charged by state and territory housing authorities: 55 per cent of their dwellings were rented for less than $48 per week compared with 27 per cent of state housing. But the degree of satisfaction with the housing provided by their own associations was significantly lower than with state housing: 38 per cent did not meet their needs compared with 26 per cent of state housing. Among the reasons for lack of satisfaction could be that tenants had not been consulted about the design before construction, perhaps because of lack of resources or not being able to identify the particular tenants who would occupy a house. KPMG (1994) report that less than half of the organisations surveyed consulted with their tenants before construction, and only a little over a third of tenants who had occupied their house since initial construction reported that they had been consulted before it was built.

There are other possible reasons. First, Indigenous people may not see much point in expressing dissatisfaction about state housing, but their own organisations might be expected to be more responsive. Second, there may

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[4] It is possible of course that respondents in Indigenous communities may not have known whether they were renting ARHP or community housing.

be a direct relationship between rents and quality of housing because associations rely on rent revenue for maintenance. In 1994, as well as the 55 per cent of community housing dwellings rented for less than $48 per week, another 29 per cent rented for $48-77 (ABS, 1996). Morel and Ross (1993) quote a Queensland study of the cost to the public housing authority of maintaining ARHP housing (Parliamentary Committee on Public Works, 1991) showing an average of '$20-33 per week across a substantial town-based stock with economies of scale.' It appears that small community housing associations would have to spend a high proportion of their rental income to adequately maintain their dwelling stock.

The financial problems are even more apparent when it is realised that there are substantial arrears. KPMG (1994) report that the average arrears of surveyed organisations equalled about 30 per cent of the rent receivable in the current year. It would be expected that a community housing organisation would be more forgiving of inability to pay rent than a state authority, let alone a private landlord. But rent arrears as large as those reported threaten the financial viability of the organisations, especially in the extreme cases where some associations were owed over 80 per cent of a year's rent at the time of the survey. It must surely limit the ability of the organisations to carry out the maintenance needed to ensure that the dwellings meet the needs of the tenants.

Why are such problems so severe? To understand them we need to look back at recent history. Until European housing began to be provided for them, Indigenous people have not had to pay for their housing. They built their traditional housing themselves from locally available material. When they moved to work on cattle stations they either continued to provide their own housing or it was provided for them as part of the payment in kind for their work on the stations. When they moved into mission stations or government settlements on reserves anything other than traditional housing was sometimes provided at very low rent and even that rent was not always able to be collected. It is not surprising then, that when governments began providing transitional or European style housing they regarded housing as being 'white fella business' (Wigley and Wigley, 1994 p. 7) and saw no reason why they should pay for it, especially when they had little or no say in whether they wanted it or what kind of housing would be provided. Similarly they expected to pay no, or very low rents when their own housing associations began providing housing using government funds, and some rejected the opportunity to move into European style housing when they found out how much rent they would have to pay.

When all else fails, the usual remedy for rent arrears is eviction but this is difficult in many situations: housing associations do not like evicting tenants who often are their kin and it is not easy to do so, and public housing authorities and even private landlords find it difficult to evict Indigenous tenants because of the bad publicity that results and because the evicted families might then be forced into less satisfactory housing.

Another reason for rent arrears is the difficulty Indigenous people have in putting aside money to meet future expenditure commitments in the face of the demand from their kin for sharing. Their traditional life style required few possessions beyond a fire stick, a spear, a digging stick and a grinding stone. Because they were frequently on the move there was no possibility of having a store of goods and meat had to be eaten as soon as it was killed. Except in relation to the environment there was no tradition of saving and the environment was a group rather than an individual resource and responsibility. Also, anyone who has money is expected to share it when it is demanded by a member of their kinship group. Failure to do so results in social disapproval and risks the cutting off of future assistance from those same kin who ask for help. The social pressures are very difficult to resist (Martin, 1995). Demand sharing operates not only in relation to money and goods owned by individuals but also to those controlled by an individual. As a result it is very difficult for individuals who have positions of responsibility and power in housing associations to resist pressures to use their position to give their kin privileged access to housing or rental advantages.

Rowse (1988, p. 52) describes one approach to overcoming the problem in the Alice Springs region. In 1977 Tungatjira (later Tangentyere) Council 'was formed to put the case for those unassimilated Aborigines who wished to live in Alice Springs.' It helped to obtain special purpose crown leases for housing of town campers, helped housing associations to make the best use of architects and landscape architects, and devised services to help make the resulting housing tenancies work. While it is primarily involved in providing basic social and economic support it also provides rent collection services for the 18 housing associations who control it. Rowse describes the rent collection procedure:

> On behalf of the Housing Associations, Tangentyere collects rent by the following mechanism. A sub-branch of Westpac, located in Tangentyere's Housing Office, processes welfare cheques for town campers who nominate Tangentyere as their address. Tangentyere staff advise cheque cashing residents of their current liabilities for rent and offer them help in dealing with other bills, such as those for electricity, water and sewerage. The same staff will convert a portion of a resident's cheque into a food voucher which can be tendered at Woolworths. In other words, those who bank at Tangentyere can get help to structure their fortnightly income into a series of accounts to pay for essentials.

He goes on to describe ways in which those who bank elsewhere also are assisted in organising their finances.

As Rowse puts it 'Paying for living in a house has emerged as a critical turning point in town campers' practices.' It appears that an umbrella organisation such as Tangentyere can provide invaluable assistance in making the transition to living in a 'user pays' society. It is controlled by Aboriginals but, being responsible to more than one tribal group, is sufficiently at arms length from kinship groups to be much less subject to kin

pressure than the housing associations. It can respond to the demands of funding governments for accountability and commercial responsibility while at the same time helping town campers to meet their financial commitments without being insensitive to the cultural demands they face. Paying the rent and other bills as a first charge on income helps to avoid demands for sharing, as does the conversion of income into food vouchers, and prepaid electricity and water cards that can be inserted into meters.

These same features have made Tangentyere a successful mediator between prospective occupants of housing and the design professionals that housing associations rely on to turn their housing funds into living space that meets their needs. The Council hires architects and planners and ensures that users' needs are fully expressed and reflected in their plans and designs.

One of the unwarranted assumptions of much of government policy is that a single kind of dwelling will be suitable for all Indigenous people. This view reflects a degree of cultural insensitivity: nobody would believe that a single housing design would be suitable for all Europeans in a community. It also ignores the great differences between the environments in which Indigenous people live. But most important it ignores the different housing priorities of individual Indigenous households and how much they are prepared to pay for different standards of European style housing. Ross (1987) found that Aboriginal people living in and around Halls Creek varied greatly in the extent to which they wanted to live in a large or a small household group, away from places where they were likely to be disturbed by drunks, and in houses with modern facilities. It could well be argued that people who are torn between the demands of a powerful traditional culture and those of an economically, legally and politically dominant culture will have more varied demands than the members of the dominant culture themselves. At Halls Creek the Housing Commission tenants were the most integrated into the dominant culture and those who camped near the town adhered most closely to traditional values. Those living on the reserves were in an intermediate position. It is not surprising that Indigenous people will say they prefer better housing if they are not told about the higher rents they will have to pay for the higher standards, as was commonly the case in Halls Creek.

Housing and Employment

It is difficult to separate housing considerations from employment opportunities for most people, but policies for housing Indigenous Australians seem to do just that. The reasons derive partly from history and partly from the freedom that government sources of income provide to live close to their traditional land and to their kin even if no jobs are available. The first effect of European settlement of Australia was to remove many Aboriginals from land that was most valuable for European farming and to move them to missions and reserves, often in remote areas where they would be out of sight and out of mind and certainly far enough away not to threaten the comfort and the livestock of the settlers and those living in the towns.

These policies were only partly successful however. There were many reasons why Aboriginal people wanted to live close to the towns (Heppell and Wigley, 1981). Over time increasing numbers have been integrated into the dominant society and now live mainly in urban areas. But a significant number still live on reserves, missions, areas excised from pastoral stations where they used to work, or in settlements close to their ancestral lands.

In many of the more remote settlements there are very few employment opportunities. The jobs that are available are of three main kinds:

* in the local public sector, for example working on roads;
* in Indigenous enterprises such as arts and crafts and tourism; or
* under the CDEP (work for the dole) scheme which often involves provision, improvement and maintenance of public facilities and community housing in their own communities.

Table 1 gives an indication of the relative importance of these different kinds of jobs in capital cities, other urban, and rural areas.

Table 1. Employment and Unemployment of Persons aged 15 Years and Over According to Location: 1994.

Sector of Employment etc	Capital Cities	Other Urban	Rural	Total
(per cent of persons aged 15 and over)				
Employed	39.4	31.7	38.4	35.9
CDEP	1.4	6.1	20.2	9.3
Other	38.0	25.6	18.1	26.6
Public sector	14.4	12.9	17.6	14.8
Commonwealth	6.0	2.4	1.0	2.9
State/Territory	7.3	6.6	6.9	6.9
Local	1.1	4.0	9.7	4.9
Private Sector	24.4	17.8	20.4	20.4
Community	2.3	5.1	12.4	6.6
Other	22.1	12.6	8.0	13.7
Not stated	0.6	1.0	0.4	0.7
Unemployed	22.2	26.8	15.8	22.1
Not in labour force	38.4	41.5	45.8	42.0
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: ABS (1995) Tables 41, 42.

It can be seen from the above table that the proportion of adult Indigenous persons employed outside CDEP schemes in rural areas is just over 18 per cent compared with 38 per cent in capital cities and nearly 26 per cent in other urban areas. Another indicator of the small number of Indigenous workers in the commercial sector of the rural economy is that only 8 per cent of adults in rural areas work in the private sector outside community employment compared to 22 per cent in capital cities and 12.6 per cent in other urban areas. It is recognised of course that much valuable work is done under CDEP and by Indigenous people working in the community and the public sectors. But there are unlikely to be enough jobs in those sectors to provide employment for the many who were looking for work as shown in the 'unemployed' row above, or those who were not in the workforce and who might look for work if jobs were available. Jobs along with access to services, are attractions of living in or close to urban centres for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike.

In part, of course, these figure reflect the limited 'success' in transferring Indigenous Australians into the market, especially the labour-market, economy. For generations almost all Indigenous people in the north of Australia worked for nothing, either in the cattle industry or on reserves. Unlike when they depended on the success of their hunting and gathering activities for food and on their own efforts for housing, they did not have to work in order to get the necessities of life. Work on cattle stations may be seen as an interesting activity, and Indigenous people running cattle on homelands may not be concerned that it makes no money for themselves as long as they can live on unemployment benefits, perhaps mediated through the CDEP program. Those who wish to take part in the market economy will be more likely to move into urban areas.

The first criterion for housing policy should be to provide housing where people want to live, and at present a significant number want to live close to their kin and their traditional land. Census results are not sufficiently comparable over time to provide a clear picture of the trends in rural urban population distribution. Housing is a durable asset and should be built where people are expected to want to live in the future. It is at least possible that the Indigenous population in rural areas will decline in the future, in which case it would be wise to provide housing in places where Indigenous people are increasingly likely to choose to live.

Self Determination

The fact that many Indigenous people in rural and remote areas do not feel responsible for their own housing suggests that communities should have more autonomy in deciding how their housing funds are spent. Such suggestions are applicable to many areas of policy related to Indigenous people (Coombs, 1994). This would be expected not only to ensure that their needs and priorities are met by the housing provided but also to encourage them to take responsibility for minor maintenance themselves and to make it more likely that contractual rents can be collected to provide funds for major

maintenance and for eventual replacement. Ideally communities should be able to determine how much of the funds available to them is spent on housing and how much on other facilities such as improved infrastructure, recreation facilities and other community amenities.

Unfortunately such a change of policy is likely to run up against both narrowly defined requirements for accountability and the politics of competition between government programs (Sanders, 1993). Funds for Aboriginal housing and infrastructure are almost always provided for particular purposes, and detailed conditions are set down for their use. Funded programs are provided also by different levels of government, further limiting transfer between them. For example on many occasions community housing associations have been required to use state housing commissions to provide professional advice. Such professionals are likely to be more responsive to the needs of the state and territory bodies that employ them than to the communities they are advising.

Funding for Aboriginal housing is not the responsibility of a single government authority and some of the authorities provide funds under several different programs. For example funds for community housing can be provided through ATSIC's program of that name or through the state housing authorities using part of their ARHP funds. Funds may be obtained, especially for the infrastructure needed for housing and to fund maintenance through other ATSIC programs. In one respect multiple sources of funding makes self determination more difficult in that different administering authorities each require that their funds be used for the purposes provided in the enabling legislation. In another way multiple sources may facilitate self determination since a community that is unable to get funds for what it sees as its needs from one source can shop around and try to get them from others.

Indigenous communities larger than extended families have little tradition of making collective decisions quickly. There are no clear hierarchies of authority such as chiefs of tribes. Nor is there a tradition of decision making by elected representatives on behalf of the community. Either of these systems facilitates the making of widely acceptable decisions on behalf of a group relatively quickly. But Indigenous communities do have decision making structures which are based on consensus, in which the elders have more influence than others, though not undisputed authority. Such decisions can take a long time as they are discussed informally in small groups, before any decision on behalf of the whole community, and a decision made at one large meeting may be revoked later as a result of further consideration. Given time and the opportunity for extended discussion and consideration, however, decisions can be made which reflect the views and priorities of the community.

Coombs (1994) and others (e.g. Ross, 1987) give reason for confidence in the ability of Indigenous groups to make collective decisions that are in the best interests of the group as a whole and that demonstrate that they are able to exercise autonomy when given the opportunity. Evidence of their ability

to make collective decisions is provided by the considerable success of the Community Development Employment Program in which members of communities are required to sacrifice the benefits to individuals of receiving unemployment benefits for the collective benefits of a program of community development. These programs have been successful in a range of different kinds of Indigenous communities across Australia (Smith, 1994, 1995, 1996).

There have been suggestions of improper use of funds by many Indigenous organisations which result in the conditions being made tighter and the communities being placed under controls that give them little discretion. In this context umbrella organisations such as Tangentyere and the urban CDEP bodies can play a useful role in ensuring accountability and at the same time looking after the interests of the individual Indigenous communities. But there are many circumstances when such umbrella organisations will not be accepted either because of the physical isolation of individual communities or because of their desire for independence.

Conclusions

1. Considering the difficult cultural adjustments which Indigenous people have had to make in coming to terms with living in large sedentarised communities, Aboriginal housing programs have been very successful over the past twenty or so years. The program should not be criticised as a waste of money.

2. There are of course still serious problems related to the quality and appropriateness of construction and of the equipment in the housing, the lack of maintenance and the difficulty of setting and collecting adequate rents. These problems require better consultation with prospective users before construction, including consideration of the level of rents that are likely to be required for housing of varying quality. Umbrella organisations such as Tangentyere seem to have the potential for helping not only in the design consultation process but also in setting and collecting rents and helping Aboriginals cope with the necessity of making periodic payments for rent, electricity and water.

3. Autonomy is important if Indigenous communities are to take responsibility for their own housing rather than continuing to assume that governments will provide, maintain and replace it.

4. Although many Indigenous people do not have the same ideas about overcrowding as non-Indigenous Australians, partly because they live around a house as much as in it, history suggests that that will been an increasing problem for them, and, as Langford (1988) recounts from her own experience, is certainly a problem for the non-Indigenous neighbours of those who live in an integrated urban or suburban setting.

5. Some health problems are closely associated with housing. According to Pholeros et al (1993) they result mainly from insufficiently robust equipment being installed in houses, from inadequate supervision of construction, especially of drains, and from periodic overcrowding. They have shown that there are solutions to all of these problems, though the solutions are more costly if they have to be retro-fitted than if they were installed at the time of initial construction.

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